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Beyond 'Crude Pragmatism' in sports coaching: Insights from C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey: A commentary

Jim McKenna

Introduction

This stimulus article (Jenkins, in press) elegantly details a range of philosophical understanding about what coaches do. I found it provocative as well as offering a helpful summary of work that had eluded me, while also acting as an aide memoire for ideas and concepts that had slipped from view. Yet, I am left with a nagging doubt that the focus – any focus – on philosophy inevitably offers an incomplete depiction. This prioritises what seems 'real'; establishing notions of reality is surely a core concern for all philosophers. Highlighting the full span of what coaching can be, I make four overlapping suggestions for enhancing the realism of such studies for jobbing coaches: relevance, accessibility, real-worldness and unconscious influences.

Relevance

While discussions about what coaching is, or what it should be, are always interesting, the 'doers' in the coaching community might want us to put flesh on bones; they might want us to more clearly specify who exactly is talking about what type of coaching. I had the sense that many of the coaches who have contributed to the existing, mostly small scale, studies were populated by eloquent males, often working as professional coaches and/or with high-level athletes. No-one should be unduly surprised by that, but there are many other coaching constituencies, not least of which is the burgeoning area of female coaches and coaching of female athletes.

Providing relevant practical examples of how philosophy maps on to existing practice may also help coaches to realise what a 'thinking', by which I mean a more meta-cognitive, approach might do for their work. As an example of how these themes might be linked, philosophy might be likened to different mental representations. These are the 'maps' used by focused practitioners as they pursue improvement.¹ Looking at the development of coaches, it is self-evident that coaching spans novices through to expert level practitioners. The prominence of 'self' in establishing personal realities in any of these stages is likely to reflect another existential stalwart, time.

Another suggestion around relevance is to move from using single labels to describe 'coaching' when the reality is that it is essentially a diffuse notion. More expressive labels might focus on timescales or intensities of involvement; the drivers of experience may also be important. In community settings, the reality is that engagement may only last as long as the coaches' child remains an active participant. In higher education, coaching may be directly linked – or not – to turnover and/or personal career progression. These drivers and contexts are likely to get under the skin of respective coaches in distinctive ways and these

processes need to be explored. Drawing on medical phenomenology, the notion of 'care'² can be extended to address 'cares' and distinctive types of 'gaze'.

Accessibility

Most community coaches – the people who are the backbone of provision – won't know to access these accounts. Even if they could, they probably wouldn't see much that resonates with their situation. Their concerns are often lazily regarded as more prosaic and nihilistic; they are pressing and even mundane.

Within the accessibility issue is the concern about who is doing all this philosophising and how they chose to represent it. Making decisions in real time could seem disconnected from the long paragraphs, the 40-word sentences and the impenetrable language, all supposedly illuminating 'ordinary' events.

While there are notable examples of researcher- philosophers who attempt to move from this position, e.g. Max van Manen,³ inaccessibility remains an issue. A self-proclaimed blue collar qualitative researcher recently published these 'grounded' comments that could easily apply to philosophy and philosophers

...This here's a kick-ass article 'bout a pissed off qualitative researcher who feels that some of you higher ed profs out there got a lotta attitude and need to be brought down a notch. I speak my mind in this piece 'bout a lotta stuff, like me, positionality, voice, labels, method, theory, ethics, and other crap like that. I write like a redneck 'cause that's what's in my blue-collar soul. I keep it real. Take it or leave it.... After all, I think that post-structuralists are the Republicans of qualitative inquiry — they's firmly convinced that they's always right and everybody else should think the same way. Fuck that. There's been this talk in our field 'bout the "crisis of representation." Well, lemme tell you: Some of us are the "crisis of representation" 'cause a coupla people out there are representin' themselves as real elitist assholes. Post-positivist, post-modernist, post-colonial, post- structuralist—aw, post-, my ass. Post this.... And one more thing: Bluecollar qualitative researchers don't give a goddamn fuck 'bout what Foucault says. (Saldana,⁴ p. 2)

Real-worldness

We can supplement and strengthen existing understanding by conducting studies that highlight what differently oriented coaches are really doing and why. Citing Foucault, Dreyfus and Rabinow⁵ remind us of the reach of actions beyond day-to-day time frames and purviews, *'People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do, does'* (p. 205). Further, more needs to be done to understand inarticulacy; even the eloquent contributors to existing studies were, at times,

unable to express why they did what they did, but that didn't stop them coaching. If language genuinely constitutes any form of reality, what then does such silence indicate?

Real-worldness can also be enhanced by establishing how philosophical themes relate to practice. This will make philosophy more acceptable; 'doing-oriented' coaches may be willing to think about what they do, and why, having indulged their prioritisation for observable action. Equally, this sequential approach might help us to grasp the elements of philosophy that drive any shift from provision into purposeful practice and from there into deliberate practice.¹

Different philosophical perspectives might also help to address the span of motives that support involvement in coaching. For example, Clark Moustakas⁶ describes experience using three forms of 'being'; being-in, being-for and being-with. His focus on being and relating covers the many reasons for coaches' engagement. On another tack, and contesting the proposition of an axis of 'shallow-deep engagement', Heidegger⁷ details two predominant ways of thinking; calculative and meditative. In this framework, the calculative can be regarded as mechanistic and effectiveness-oriented, while meditative thinking is concerned with deep meaning and thinking about how issues are being approached. Combined – each helps the other – they help coaches to be effective and resourceful (and to satisfy the 'empirical ego') and to make sense of what they are doing and why. In this integration, coaches can be who they are, as they are.

Unconscious influences

Finally, there is a need to consider unconscious influences on coaching. Other fields increasingly recognise the importance of the environment for 'triggering' human behaviour.⁸ This creates an opportunity to address the philosophical implications of the dynamic contexts where coaches work. Importantly, this area of work relies on the non-conscious processes that drive so much of our daily behaviour.

We might also use the idea of coaching prototypes⁹ – people whose coaching practice is 'copied', whether explicitly or implicitly – to understand how different coaching approaches command attention and take root. Using Moustakas' ⁶ example, the idea of prototypes allows us to consider another type of being and relating; 'being-like'. Many established coaches speak in reverential terms about a coach (and oftentimes a teacher) who particularly influenced the way they coach. What makes a particular prototype especially attractive but not another? The portrayal of coaches – whether accurate or not – in biographies, autobiographies and/or newspapers, may present (in)authentic models that get copied. Another possibility is that the favoured coach embodies features that resonate with the copiers' most valued mental representations, which links back to deliberate practice.

Conclusion

In this short commentary, stimulated by Jenkins, I have suggested four interlinked avenues for making more use of philosophy in coaching. This spans relevance, accessibility, real-worldness and unconscious influences. Some of this work might be best undertaken before settling on any of the current accounts. Perhaps, our collective attention should be less on what coaching is, as on the many things it can be? They are all real in their own ways.

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